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BROWNING'S *A BLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON*:
A DEFENCE

A Blot in the 'Scutcheon was presented under Macready's management in 1843, and under Phelps's in 1848, in both instances scoring a decided success in the minds and hearts of its finer-grained auditors, where scoring is most worth while. Joseph Arnould, a friend of both Browning and Alfred Domett, writing to the latter shortly after the first performance¹ declares that—

“The first night was magnificent. Poor Phelps did his utmost, Helen Faucit very fairly, and there could be no mistake at all about the honest enthusiasm of the audience. The gallery (and this, of course, was very gratifying, because not to be expected at a play of ‘Browning’) took all the points quite as quickly as the pit, and entered into the general interest and feeling of the action far more than the boxes—some of whom took it upon themselves to be shocked at being betrayed into so much interest for a young woman who had behaved so improperly as Mildred. Altogether, the first night was a triumph. The second night was evidently presided over by the spirit of the manager. I was one of about sixty or seventy in the pit, and we yet seemed crowded when compared to the desolate emptiness of the boxes. The gallery was again full, and again among all who were there were the same decided impressions of pity and horror produced. The third night I again took my wife to the boxes. It was evident at a glance that it was to be the last. My own delight, and hers too, in the play was increased at this third representation, and would have gone on increasing to a thirtieth; but the miserable, great, chilly house, with its apathy and emptiness, produced on us both the painful sensation which made her exclaim that she could cry with vexation at seeing so noble a play so basely marred. Now, there can be no doubt whatever that the absence of Macready's name from the list of performers of the new play was the means of keeping away numbers from the house. Whether if he had played and they had come the play would have been permanently popular is another ques-

¹Frederic G. Kenyon (Editor) : *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*.

tion. I don't myself think it would. With some of the grandest situations and finest passages you can conceive, it does undoubtedly want a sustained interest to the end of the third act; in fact, the whole of that act on the stage is a falling off from the second act, which I need not tell you is for all purposes of performance the most unpardonable fault. Still, it will no doubt—nay, it must, have done this, *viz.*, produced a higher opinion than ever of Browning's genius and the great things he is yet to do in the minds not only of a clique, but of the general world of readers. No one now would shake his head if you said of our Robert Browning, 'This man will go far yet.'"

And in his ²*Personalia* Edmund Gosse tells us that—

"When the curtain went down the applause was vociferous. Phelps was called and recalled, and there arose the cry of 'Author!' To this Mr. Browning remained silent and out of sight, and the audience continued to shout until Anderson came forward and keeping his eye on Mr. Browning said, 'I believe the author is not present, but if he is I entreat him to come forward!' The poet, however, turned a deaf ear to this appeal, and went home very sore with Macready, and what he considered his purposeless and vexatious scheming. *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* was announced to be played 'three times a week until further notice'; and was performed with entire success to crowded houses, until the final collapse of Macready's schemes brought it abruptly to a close."

Of two contemporary newspaper notices, one from the *Literary Gazette*, has it that—

"At the end the applause greatly predominated; but still we cannot promise the *Blot* that it will not soon be wiped off the stage,"

while the other, from the *Examiner*, is—

"...not sanguine of the chances of continued patronage to *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*. People are already finding out, we see, that there is a great deal that is equivocal in its sentiments, a vast quantity in its situations, and in its general composition not much to 'touch humanity'. We do not pretend to know what should touch humanity, beyond

²Edmund Gosse: *Robert Browning: Personalia*.

that which touches our own hearts, but we would give little for the feelings of a man who could read this tragedy without a deep emotion. It is very sad; painfully and perhaps needlessly so; but it is unutterably tender, passionate, and true."

Interesting accounts of the Browning-Macready misunderstanding in relation to this performance may be found in Gosse's *Personalia*; Mrs. Orr's *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*; Professor Lounsbury's *Atlantic* article, "A Philistine View"; Browning's letter to Frank Hill, Editor of the London *Daily News*, written December 15, 1884; and in *Robert Browning and Alfred Domett*.

Of the revival in 1848 ³Mrs. Browning wrote as follows to her friend, Miss Mary Russell Mitford, from Florence:—

"We have been, or at least I have been, a little anxious lately about the fate of the *Blot in the 'Scutcheon*, which Mr. Phelps applied for my husband's permission to revive at Sadler's. Of course, putting the request was a mere form, as he had every right to act the play, and there was nothing to answer but one thing. Only it made one anxious—made me anxious—till we heard the result, and we, both of us, are very grateful to dear Mr. Chorley, who not only made it his business to be at the theatre the first night, but, before he slept, sat down like a true friend to give us the story of the result, and never, as he says, was a more complete and legitimate success. The play went straight to the heart of the audience, it seems, and we hear of its continuance on the stage from the papers. So far, so well. You may remember, or may not have heard, how Macready brought it out and put his foot on it in the flash of a quarrel between manager and author, and Phelps, knowing the whole secret and feeling the power of the play, determined on making a revival of it in his own theatre, which was wise, as the event proves. Mr. Chorley called his acting really 'fine'."

The play was successfully produced in America by Lawrence Barrett in 1885, and by Mrs. Lemoyne in 1905.

Critical opinion concerning this drama has been strangely divided. On the one hand, ⁴Professor W. J. Alexander considers

³ *Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*.

⁴ W. J. Alexander: *Introduction to the Poetry of Robert Browning*.

it "unnatural and repugnant," and ⁵Miss F. Mary Wilson feels that "the impression is one of staginess, slightness and ineffectualness, almost as though the planned-out work of an inferior writer had been bequeathed to Browning to make the best of." On the other hand, ⁶Dickens wrote to his friend and biographer Forster:—

"Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow. To say that there is anything in its subject save what is lovely, true, deeply affecting, full of the best emotion, the most earnest feeling, and the most true and tender source of interest, is to say that there is no light in the sun, and no heat in the blood. It is full of genius, natural and great thoughts, profound and yet simple and beautiful in its vigour. I know nothing that is so affecting, nothing in any book I have ever read, as Mildred's recurrence to that 'I was so young—I had no mother.' I know no love like it, no passion like it, no moulding of a splendid thing after its conception like it. And I swear it is a tragedy that must be played; and must be played, moreover, by Macready. . . . But the tragedy I shall never forget, or less vividly remember than I do now. And if you tell Browning that I have seen it, tell him that I believe from my soul there is no man living (and not many dead) who could produce such a work."

And ⁷Arthur Symons, a so much more warrantable critic than Dickens, pronounces *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon*—

" . . . the simplest, and perhaps the deepest and finest of Mr. Browning's plays. The Browning Society's performances, and Mr. Barrett's in America, have proved its acting capacities, its power to hold and thrill an audience. The language has a rich simplicity of the highest dramatic value, quick with passion, pregnant with thought and masterly in imagination; the plot and characters are perhaps more interesting and affecting than in any other of the plays; while the effect of the whole is impressive from its unity. The scene is English; the time is in the eighteenth century; the motive, family honour and dishonour. The story appeals to ready popular emotions, emotions which, though

⁵F. Mary Wilson: *A Primer on Browning*.

⁶John Forster: *Life of Dickens*.

⁷Arthur Symons: *An Introduction to the Study of Browning*.

lying nearest the surface, are also the most deeply rooted. The whole action is passionately pathetic, and it is infused with a twofold tragedy, which hangs on a word, spoken only when too late to save three lives. This irony of circumstance, while it is the source of what is saddest in human discord, is also the motive of what has come to be the only satisfying harmony in dramatic art. It takes the place, in our modern world, of the necessity of the Greeks; and is not less impressive because it arises from the impulse and unreasoning wilfulness of man rather than from the implacable inconsistency of God. It is with perfect justice, both moral and artistic, that the fatal crisis, though mediately the result of accident, of error, is shown to be the consequence and the punishment of wrong. A tragedy resulting from the mistakes of the wholly innocent would jar on our sense of right, and could never produce a legitimate work of art. Even *Œdipus* suffers, not merely because he is under the curse of a higher power, but because he is wilful and rushes upon his own fate. *Timon* suffers, not because he was generous and good, but from the defects of his qualities. So, in this play, each of the characters calls down upon his own head the suffering which at first seems to be a mere caprice and confusion of chance. Mildred Tresham and Henry Mertoun, both very young, ignorant and unguarded, have loved. They attempt a late reparation, apparently with success, but the hasty suspicion of Lord Tresham, Mildred's brother, diverted indeed into a wrong channel, brings down on both a terrible retribution. Tresham, who shares the ruin he causes, feels, too, that his punishment is due. He has acted without pausing to consider, and he is called on to pay the penalty of 'evil wrought by want of thought.' "

The present writer's opinion inclines toward Symons's view rather than Alexander's, although he would not, in a comparative study of Browning's dramas, rank *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'* quite so high as does Symons. While it is true that Browning makes some doubtful concessions to conventional stage requirements, and while the play, perhaps on that account, exhibits occasional melodramatic tendencies, yet it is worth so much more as a work of high creative art than as a theatrical performance that its stage 'points' prove, after all, only the slightest blots on *its* escutcheon. The double motive, first of all, is admirably indicated and inwoven — Thorold's

love of honor, Mildred's love of purity. Though Mildred has ignorantly sinned and 'conventionally 'fallen', yet her passion for purity is truer, completer, more understanding than is over-righteous Thorold's love of pride. The history of the relation of these two—for they are the prime persons of the play, protagonist and antagonist, and the crisis is developed during their increasingly tense situation in Act II—the history of the relation of these two is the old history of professional good *versus* human instinct; of technical honor *versus* the blind errors of love; and of the consciously superior person, self-appointed vicar of the Eternal Will, *versus* her whose warm faith and affection have been hiding in a sort of golden maiden-mist the figure of the sworded angel that is now to meet her as she turns to reënter Eden.

For Thorold, whom his retainers find precisely "what a nobleman should be," and who is Mertoun's boyish ideal of "the scholar and the gentleman," is yet more stained than Mildred, the dove whose pinion Mertoun has so rashly hurt. That is Browning's insistent implication, and it is a very true and impressive one. Thorold is proud of homage, of the recognition of his honor, rather than of the root principle and subtle genius of honor-in-itself. He is a correct traditional gentleman, but has not a nature adequate to his present need. Kind and brotherly as his heart would have him be, he becomes, nevertheless, in habit and programme, imposingly statuesque, finely dead. Mildred has a keener and more just sense of honor than his own, for she subjectively agonizes and hopes, where he objectively resents and condemns; she is even more Hebraistic than is he in her recognition of the inevitableness of law and fate:—

"Needs

Must I have sinned much, so to suffer!"

"Oh why, why glided sin the snake
Into the Paradise Heaven meant us both?"

". . . . This will not be!"

"Sin has surprised us, so will punishment."

But she is a warm Hellenist also in her love of life, of family, of Mertoun; in her romantic courage; her smiling rallies from despondency; her childlike trust in the fatherly indulgence of

God. In brief, gloomed though her spirit is with a sense of impending punishment, she dimly sees behind its dreadful cloud the lining of redemption, and feels for this very reason constrained into a strange loyalty to the law of Nemesis, a loyalty she can less and less shake off. The souls of both brother and sister are torn with the tragedy of conflicting ideals, of an unwithstandable invasion of their highest goods, and their final recognitions of the great meanings behind the tragedy of each bring the play to a close:

Mildred—

"As I dare approach that Heaven
Which has not bade a living thing despair,
Which needs no code to keep its grace from stain,
But bids the vilest worm that turns on it
Desist and be forgiven—I—forgive not,
But bless you, Thorold, from my soul of souls!"

Tresham—

"Vengeance is God's, not man's. Remember me!"

The whole atmosphere and movement of the drama may be strikingly keyed by Sidney Lanier's beautiful lines from *The Marshes of Glynn*:—

"God out of knowledge and good out of infinite pain,
And sight out of blindness and purity out of a stain."

Of the other characters, Guendolen and Mertoun, although dramatically subordinate, are drawn with skill and sympathy. Guendolen, particularly, is a human woman, sisterly, loving, happy-hearted, quick-witted—whose ministry to Mildred at the moment of moments rouses one's emotion by its imperative and affectionate power. Mertoun wins her early pleased regard, not only as the lover of Mildred, but also because she detects the zest and sincerity behind his half-timid acknowledgments of Thorold's worth and friendship. Mertoun is a being like to Mildred herself and worthy to be her lover, though with less sensitiveness to the record-tappings of spiritual telegraphy. He is incurably young, hopeful, romantic, brown-haired, blue-eyed,—a very Romeo for looks and love. As Guendolen's nobility rises to its height in the presence of Mildred's suffering, so his bright spirit most gallantly expresses itself toward both Mildred and

Thorold in the moment of his death. Austin is slightly drawn, and has but little place in either action or dialogue, save where dramatic necessity may prescribe his presence for the sake of emphasis of situation or convenience of arrangement.

Gerard, the warrener, loyal as the old hunter is loyal in *The Flight of the Duchess*, is the technical pivot of the play, upon whose revelation to Thorold the crisis and catastrophe depend, and whose faithful breast is itself woefully self-divided in its own personal tragedy, as wavering now toward the formal honor of Earl Tresham's house and now toward instinctive faith in the innocence of his young mistress, Mildred.

There are some outstanding criticisms of certain manners and moments (or expressions of moments) in this drama that ought here, perhaps, to be presented and, if possible, answered.

In "Mr. Henry Jones's paper read before the Boston Browning Society, "Browning as a Dramatic Poet," he writes:—

"What a critic has a complete right to object to is that Mildred is presented to us in no other mood than this of sublime moral tension; and that, so far as she is concerned, the whole action takes place not in the ordinary world, but on 'Mount Sinai altogether on a smoke,' amidst the terrors of a broken law. I would repeat my belief that practically our only task here on earth is 'to learn thro' evil that good is best,' and that the drama at its height turns on moral issues. But, on the other hand, that lesson has to be learned in a natural environment, where the sun shines and the flowers grow, and men and women eat and drink, marry and are given in marriage. That natural environment is not to be found in this play. Shakespeare would have made it break in, so intimate is his touch on reality. When the moods and passions have swept his characters beyond the confines of ordinary life, the common world comes knocking at the door, and we have such scenes as that of the porter in *Macbeth*, which deepens the tragedy and makes it real by letting in the contrast of the common light of day in its ordinary course. But Mildred lives throughout the play in another world from ours; or, if it is our world, if our world is spiritual at its core and morality its essence, its natural veil is torn off by the poet. Her thoughts, her true

⁸*Boston Browning Society Papers, 1886-97.*

self, had already passed beyond the walls of the prison-house. Her—

‘spirit yearned to purge
Her stains off in the fierce renewing fire.’

And in consequence her death does not touch us like the deaths of Cordelia or Desdemona. She is not removed from our very midst, and we are not left desolate; for she was always far away, in a world not ours.”

Although Mr. Jones further develops his thought, enough has been quoted, perhaps, to show his meaning. Are his words quite fair? Does not his disappointment amount to a willingness to blame the nineteenth-century Browning because he does not write in the manner of the sixteenth-century Shakespeare? Is it not true that the instincts and interests of both writers and readers in our own time are immensely more subjective in point of preoccupation than they were then, and that we are all willing now to take much for granted that it was necessary to impress particularly upon the minds of Elizabethan audiences concerning *locale* and environment? If our ancestors could not work out their spiritual problems without frequent specific assurances of the

“Good gigantic smile o’ the brown old earth,”

because their superstitions made these problems more fearful, though not more awful, to them than to us—if they needed such tyings to earth, so do not we. With the Anglo-Saxon, to lose his grip on reality—and this was easy for him—was to become for the nonce a wild poet, beating his way about amid the dragons of the deep and the nicors of unknown lands. He was afraid—and in large measure for this very reason unable—to think much, although he felt profoundly. The Elizabethan temper marked an advance in dignity and self-confidence; but the modern imagination is, relatively speaking, weaned from the bosom of the old material Gaia, and can experience sustained adventure. Even so, Browning does not ignore the external realities in his dramas—certainly not in this one. They are there, duly in their place—he does not care to exhibit them or even quite record them. They are implied. One does not say of a plant that it grows in the earth; one only says that it grows. It is in the growth instinct

and tendency that Browning is so intensely interested, in common with all moderns. Nor is it Shakespeare's earth-regard that makes him Shakespeare, prophet of all time, as well as interpreter of his own, but rather his ability often to persuade his auditors and readers away from earth, in a fashion which none of his contemporaries could grasp or follow.

Another objection has been raised, this time by *Prof. W. J. Rolfe and Miss Heloise Hersey, to the age of Mildred:—

“‘Mildred is fourteen.’ In this extraordinary statement seems to be the chief dramatic blemish of the play. It taxes our credulity to believe that Juliet was only fourteen; but with her we could at least fall back on the theory that girls develop more rapidly in southern countries than northern, and that they are married proportionately early. Here we are asked to credit the amazing statement that a conservative English Lord deliberately and indeed eagerly arranges the betrothal of his sister at the time-honoured Juliet age. It is interesting to note how completely Browning ignores his own limitations as to years. Far instance, Tresham speaks of Mildred as ‘imbued with lore,’ etc. If the English girl of the last century reached that point of culture at fourteen, what must she have been at forty? It is impossible to believe that Browning ever actually pictured Mildred as fourteen, though we see in the next scene why he wants to represent her as young as possible.”

To this it may be replied that Browning is no more attempting to make a fact-point of the matter than of the ages of Pippa or Pompilia. It is not the poet's business to inform, but to interpret and inspire. All that Browning cares about here is that we shall understand Mildred to be young indeed in body, and yet, on account of native instinct and family training, as unusual in mind as she is beautiful of feature. Even on the side of historical fact, it is perhaps worth while remarking that marriages were contracted at such early ages during the eighteenth and even the nineteenth centuries, in both England and America, oftener than would now be supposed. It does not seem to have surprised anyone that Poe married the Lenore of his *Raven*, Virginia Clemm, in 1835, when she was but thirteen; and even more sig-

*Rolfe and Hersey (Editors) : *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon and Other Dramas*.

nificant for us here is the love affair and probable marriage of Stella and the famous Dean.

In his ¹⁰*The Poetry of Robert Browning* the late Stopford Brooke expresses strong objection to Mildred's over-submissiveness during the library scene, in these words:—

"One touch of the courage she shows in the last scene would have saved in the previous scene herself, her lover, and her brother. The lie she lets her brother infer when she allows him to think that the lover she has confessed to is not the Earl, yet that she will marry the Earl, degrades her altogether and justly in her brother's eyes, and is so terribly out of tune with her character that I repeat I cannot understand how Browning could invent that situation. It spoils the whole presentation of the girl. It is not only out of her character, it is out of nature."

I am very far from wishing it to seem that I hold too partial or elastic a brief for Browning, but to my thinking this criticism is extraordinarily deficient in grasp and feeling. Out of character? Out of nature? The truth is precisely otherwise. In the dramatic romance, *Count Gismond*, Browning's heroine asks:—

"What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine's whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul,"

on which Mrs. Browning comments:—

"You never wrote anything which lived with me more than that. It is such a dreadful truth."

So with Mildred. She has not the power to withstand the shock of her brother's accusation; she is—and it is Browning's almost sole endeavor to present and prove her so—relatively, essentially innocent, and innocence has always been far less ready and able to justify itself in speech than has guilt. Her fine nature, too, sees that even mistake, like crime itself, must provoke its Nemesis—in Act I Mildred has indicated more than once her prevision, her sense, of Fate. Now that Fate is suddenly upon her, she is stunned into acceptance of its reality, and is quite unable to challenge its right.

"The first shame over, all that would might fall."

¹⁰ Stopford Brooke: *The Poetry of Robert Browning*.

If, on the one hand, vengeance belongs to God; so, on the other, she feels, must justification. It is true that a word would save her, but it is a word that Love cannot speak, for it involves her lover. Blameless as he is in her eyes, he must still be held blameless by all others, and she welcomes martyrdom, instinctively, unquestioningly, for his sake, as a pure, womanly, natural Mildred would surely do. The crisis lies in these words:—

Tresham—

“Now dictate

This morning's letter that shall countermand
Last night's—do dictate that!”

Mildred—

“But, Thorold—if
I will receive him as I said?”

Tresham—

“The Earl?”

Mildred—

“I will receive him.”

And it is a crisis alike of extraordinary dramatic value and of human likeness. Neither Mildred nor Thorold can do other than so; they are in the clutch of circumstance.

But the most strenuous broadside delivered against this play is to be found in the article by ¹¹Prof. Thomas R. Lounsbury—already referred to—entitled “A Philistine View.” It is therein premised that “the production is here treated from the uncultured, unspiritual Philistine point of view exclusively,” and the decks being thus rapidly cleared for action, some seven or eight guns are fired. Professor Lounsbury's contentions anticipate that of Stopford Brooke, and include two others that are, perhaps, especially noticeable, namely, the superfluosness of the intrigue and the needless folly and danger of the last two visits of Henry to Mildred. “There is no reason,” he declares, “why the hero should not from the very outset have wooed the heroine in the way of honorable marriage.” If his failure to do so was due to fear of Lord Tresham, “this fear had not extended to other members of the family, where it would have been more in place. That which had prevented him from seeking from the brother what could

¹¹ *The Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1899.

have been had for the asking did not prevent him from engaging and succeeding in the effort to overcome the virtue of the sister."

It seems to the present writer that the poet's own explanation is eminently satisfactory, although to some temperaments this English restraint will continue, no doubt, to seem inexplicable. Love is not unusually at variance with prudence and common-sense. It is, of course, wholly wide of the mark to speak of the Henry-Mildred relationship as the deliberate effort of a rake to betray a woman.

The second objection—touching the manifest unwisdom of Mertoun's midnight visits after his formal recognition as Mildred's suitor, appears more formidable, yet will hardly need an extended reply. The intimate conversation of the lovers with which the first act concludes demands complete privacy on account of both its length and its content; and not only so, but Mildred and Henry alike feel that the death of the old relation must be tenderly watched and its burial rightly accomplished before they can together take up the outward difficulties and responsibilities of the new. The human probability of the song, indeed, we may agree with Professor Lounsbury, is questionable, but of its dramatic virtue and self-justifying lyric beauty there can be no doubt. The final visit is merely the keeping of an "appointment by one who would regard it as sacred, and who was ignorant of any urgent reason why it should not be kept. Nor does Guendolen characterlessly forward the catastrophe, or "simply fold her hands," as is charged.

"First lead this Mildred to her room,"

she requires of Austin,—

"Go on the other side;
And then we'll seek your brother."

That their search for Tresham fails is well within the bounds of the probable and is, of course, dramatically necessary. Mildred's prevision of her lover's doom is not to be taken as a conscious prophecy, for it is only with a tardy shock of conviction that she accuses Thorold at last of Mertoun's murder, with the more ago-

¹² *Mertoun*: "Oh, trust me! Then our final meeting's fixed to-morrow night?"

nized wonder since his code of honor bids him await plea and palliation before he strikes.

The final point of censure that I wish here to notice is made by ¹⁸William Sharp, as follows:—

“More disastrous, poetically, is the ruinous banality of Mildred’s anti-climax, when after her brother reveals himself as her lover’s murderer, she, like the typical young Miss Anglaise of certain French novelists, betrays her incapacity for true passion by exclaiming, in effect, ‘What, you’ve murdered my lover! Well, tell me all. Pardon? Oh, well, I pardon you; at least I think I do. Thorold, my dear brother, how very wretched you must be!’

“I am unaware if this anti-climax has been pointed out by anyone, but surely it is one of the most appalling lapses of genius which could be indicated.”

Now, that is very unworthy and, it should be said, uncharacteristic criticism on the part of this usually thoughtful and sensitive writer. All dramatic moments must be judged with careful regard to the steps that have conditioned them, and to the particular situation of the chief person or persons concerned. The Mildred of the crisis, who has sacrificed her reputation for Mertoun’s sake, is not the Mildred who would hesitate to yield her life in the catastrophe when Mertoun lies stiffening in death. Utterly unselfish, here as there, her love for Henry, even upon her first moments of awareness of his end, instantly leaps out toward his slayer in a sympathetic, vicarious sense of error and remorse. That such an instinct is psychologically true has been shown time and again in life as in literature. The first impulse of a finely unselfish nature, upon experiencing sorrow, is to compassionate fellow-sufferers. Add to this Mildred’s sense of her own imminent death—a sense that would clear away all false resentments and half-forgivenesses, and insure a quickened last insight into the things of human experience. And add again her willingness to yield to Fate the things that are Fate’s. Mildred, like Caponsacchi, “finds out when the day of things is done.” As to the speaker in *The Flight of the Duchess*, so now to her—“there seemed nothing to do more.” With Mertoun dead, she is

¹⁸ William Sharp: *Life of Robert Browning*.

already dead, and her forgiveness of Thorold is but the echo and repetition of her lover's excuse for his mistaken foe, who has now at last come to see—

"through
The troubled surface of his crime and yours
A depth of purity immovable."

A tragedy of love and pride,—of love that, unwittingly violating Love's canons, suffers Fate's penalty, yet in its very suffering finds Fate but another name for Love; of pride that brings being and seeming too close together, and so loses the subtler lights that each may cast—this is the story of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon'*. The two refrains of Mildred's motherlessness and of Thorold's stainlessness, touching the play now with tenderness and now with portent, though different in occasion, are one in meaning. They seem to say: Who loves, lives; and who lives, loves!

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